DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 885 FL 017 842

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TITLE Assessing the Importance of Second Language Competence: An Analysis of Expatriate Managers in Taiwan.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 12p.; In: Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions (see FL 017 839).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Qualifications; *Business Administration; Business Communication; *Chinese; Chinese Culture; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; Foreign Countries; Foreign Nationals; *Intercultural Communication; *Language Attitudes; *Language Proficiency; Middle Management; Second Language Learning; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS *Taiwan

ABSTRACT

A study investigated the communication patterns among 11 foreign expatriate managers and 75 Chinese managers in Taiwan with four different levels of second language competence. In particular, the study examined (1) how foreign expatriate managers perceive the importance of second language competence; (2) how Chinese local managers perceive the importance of foreign expatriate managers' second language competence; and (3) how communication is affected by relative levels of competence in English and Chinese and by cultural differences. It was found that second language proficiency is becoming increasingly important, and that elementary Chinese language competence is of significant value for foreign managers, while intermediate Chinese competence does not aid foreign managers in on-the-job communication, except for listening in some group situations or as an aid in understanding Chinese culture. Foreign managers fluent in both Chinese and English experienced the highest communication effectiveness, and those with limited second-language proficiency but an appreciation of Chinese culture were better able to compensate for their second-language limitations. The significant payoffs in learning a second language appear to come at both ends of a Chinese-English language competency continuum, with fewer benefits accruing in the middle. (MSE)

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ED304885

Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions.

Assessing the Importance of Second Language Competence: An Analysis of Expatriate Managers in Taiwan

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Submitted

to

Language and Communication for
World Business and the Professionals

1988

FL017842

Assessing the Importance of Second Language Compentence: An Analysis of Expatriate Managers in Taiwan

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Introduction

The use of more than one language in multinational corporations compounds the communication problem. Although English is a universal language, the study reported in this paper shows that foreign expatriates with second language competence, even limited proficiency, win rapport with their subordinates and are able to communicate more effectively and completely.

The conclusions presented in this paper are based on an analysis of communication patterns among eleven foreign expatriates and 75 Chinese managers with different levels of second language competencies: low, low-intermediate, high-intermediate, and advanced. The paper addresses: (a) how foreign expatriates assess the importance of second language competence, (b) how Chinese local managers assess the importance of foreign expatriates knowing a second language, and (c) how communication is affected by relative levels of competencies in second languages (Chinese and English) and by cultural differences between expatriate and Chinese managers.

Research Method

The data for this paper was collected in the summers of 1986 and 1987. Data were gathered from 14 multinational corporations operating in Taiwan. Of 14 companies, seven are joint-ventures or subsidiaries of foreign companies, seven are domestic enterprises having import-export international business. These enterprises ranged from a domestic consulting firm to a producer of high-tech products with thousands of employees worldwide. Most are large firms with recognizable names in variety of industries: chemical products, high-tech, banking, consumer products, civil engineering, manafacturing of auto and home appliance, health-and medical-care products, sports, television and advertising agency. These firms were not selected randomly, but instead consisted of those which consented to participate in the study within the time parameters available.

Personnel from various organizational levels were interviewed- from CEOs' to first-level managers. The sections of interviews which are most relevant to this paper focus on: (a) the self-assessment of immportance of second language competence of foreign expatriates, (b) the viewpoints of local managers assessing the importance of foreign expatriates knowing a second language, (c) the communication effectiveness of foreign expatriates and overseas Chinese expatriates, and (d) the ways of solving miscommunication and communicating more effectively.

Results of the Study

The results of the study are organized according to the expatriate managers' competency levels in spoken Mandarin. There were the following four groups: Group A-- non-or limited second-language competency (proficiency level is 0+1 - 0+2 on FSI scales). Group B-- low-intermediate (1+0 - 1+3 or 2+1), Group C- high-intermediate (2+3 - 3+4), and Group D- advanced or near native-like (4+...). Exhibit 1 summarizes the factors which promoted effective communication as well as those factors which inhibited effective communication for the expatriate managers. The data in the exhibit is organized according to the second language competency levels of the expatriate managers. In the folloing paragraphs, there is a addition elaboration on these groups of expatriate managers.

Group A: Foreign expatriates with Low level of second language compentence. For those low level of second language competence of foreign expatriates, their proficiency levels are 0+1- 0+2, according to Foreign Service Institute (FSI) rating scales. In other words, these expatriates may know a few isolated words and phrases, but have no practical knowledge of the spoken Chinese language. For this group of foreign expatriates, using a second language to communicate with subordinates in the host country is not possible. The communication

problems may be compounded if the local managers personnel do not possess a good command of English. In this condition, communication becomes one-way and the messages have been filtered. An expatriate said, " The information that I got is always the 'final product'..., but what I want is the raw information.... I want to know the process, not just their final decision."

Although the limited second language proficiency may hinder the efficiency of communication, these foreign expatriates, however, develop their way of compensting for the second lnaguage deficiencies. According to expatriates, in meetings with Chinese subordinate managers, they would use chalkboards to write down the key words, or numbers of amount. In addition, these managers follow up meetings with memos summarizing conclusions and instructions. Some expatriates also rely on the Chinese subordinates with higher English proficiency to serve as a "bridge" between foreign expatriates and the subordinates with low-level English proficiency. Another way these managers solve the communication problem was to carefully select good secretaries. A good secretary will provide information for the boss and protect the boss from making mistakes.

Group B: Foreign expatriates with low-intermediate level of second language competence. The second language proficiency of this group of expatriates falls on 1+0- 1+3 or 2+1. The expatriates may be able to use

greetings, ordinary social expressions, and limited vocabulary for office requirements, such as Chinese names of products, product descriptions, and some key words in the meetings. Although this group of foreign expatriates were not able to conduct meetings in a second language; yet, they surely won good rapport of the local managers, especially those Chinese personnel who possess the limited English proficiency.

Group C: Foreign expatriates with high-intermediate level of second language competence. The second language proficiency of this group of expatriates ranged from 2+3-3+4. In other words, these foreign expatriates have sufficient control of the structure of the language and adequate vocabulary to handle presentation requirements and professional discussions with one or more special field, but are not as fluent as native speakers. This group of foreign expatriates have advantages in communicating with their subordinates; they can use both language (Chinese and English) in the communication process.

Group D: Foreign expatriates with high level of second language proficiency. The last group was composed overseas Chinese foreign expatriates. These expatriates possess native-like proficiency levels in both Chinese and English. The advantages of overseas Chinese foreign expatriates are (a) the familarity with both the overseas and the Chinese cultures, (b) the possibly more complete communication because of

knowing both languages. Knowing both cultures is conducive to the communication, especially regarding subtleties and delicate matters.. These managers can benefit from understanding the high-context nature of Chinese culture and avoid miscommunication because of the difference in communication styles between two different cultures. By knowing two languages, these expatriates do benefit from both upward communication from Chinese subordinates and downward communication to these personnel. However, the disadvantages of these overseas Chinese expatriates are that (a) Local subodinates expect more of them than they do of English-speaking foreign expatriates, and (b) These overseas Chinese expatriates may be overconfident about themselves. That is, because they are not completely integrated in the local Chinese culture, these expatriates Chinese managers still may experience cultural differences from the Taiwanese Chinese.

Besides interviewing eleven foreign expatriates, seventy-five Chinese individuals were interviewed. They were asked about their viewpoints of foreign expatriates knowing a second language and about communicating with expatriate managers. The results were quite varied: The responses depended on the English proficiency levels of the Chinese personnel. For those Chinese personnel with high-intermediate and advanced levels of English proficiency, they do not mind that much whether the foreign

expatriates can speak Chinese or not; however, they all agree that knowing a minimally survival Chinese is conducive to the expatriates in the social context. As for the Chinese personnel with low to low-intermediate level of English proficiency, these personnel stated that having expatriates possess a second language competency in Chinese will help communication.

Regardless of the English proficiency levels of Chinese personnel, all Chinese personnel agree that (a) there are disadvantages and difficulties in using a second language (English) to express their ideas; that is, concepts are easier to be understood in Chinese, (b) The Chinese individuals find it easier to communicate with Chinese-born American expatriates because they can switch from English to Chinese when they find it difficult to express the concepts in English, and (c) the Chinese personnel were appreciateive if expatriate managers have even a minimal competence in spoken Chinese. But knowing a little bit of language does not help the expatriate managers in task-related communication.

Conclusions

The major conclusions of the study are summarized as follows: (a) proficiency in second language is becoming increasingly important, (b) elementary second language (Chinese) competency is of significant importance for expatriate managers, (c) intermediate second language competence (Chinese) does not aid expatriate managers in on-the-job

communication (except for listening in some group situations, as an aid in understanding Chinese culture, and in off the job situations), (d) expatriate managers fluent in both Chinese and English experienced the highest communication effectiveness and (e) expatriate managers with limited second language proficiency but with an appreciation and/or understanding of Chinese culture were better able to compensate for their second language limitations. So, the significant payoffs in learning a second language comes at both ends of a continuum with fewer benefits accuring in the middle. The practical significance of this finding is that an expatriate manager is likely to become discouraged while acquiring intermediate level competency. At the intermediate language levels, the expatriate manager in a Chinese environment is not able to effectively apply his or her newly acquired lnaguage competency in most on-the-job situations. English remains the medium of communication as Chinese individuals can receive more complete and accurate messages in the expatriate managers' native language (English) than in their incompletely acquired second language (Chinese). In addition, the expatriate managers are not prepared to receive messages in advanced or native Chinese. But there always is a positive benefit for increasing second language proficiency, but these benefits vary in size and are less visible at the middle compentency levels. The less visible benefit at the intermediate levels is that the expatriate managers

are gradually learning to pick up more cues and increasingly able to make sense of the cultural environment. And as proficiency increases, the expatriate manager is able to piece together and interprete the conversations of Chinese colleagues.

Exhibit 1

Factors that promote and inhibit the effectiveness of foreign expatriates in communicating with Taiwanese individuals

category	proficiency level	factors promoting coomunication	factors inhibiting communication
Group A	non or limited (0•1 - 0•2)	1. Actual or perceive better understanding of upper level/headquarter's policy and instructions; possible broader and more accurate message content to communicate	1. Limited second language competence; cannot communicate concepts and ideas
		2. Subordinates listen more intently if superior show empathy.	2. Unaware of cultural cues and customs.
		3. Personal secretaries assume greater role in both communication and decision making process; i.e., shows importance of selecting a competent assistant.	
		4. More use of non-verbal communication to compensate for language deficiency.	
Group B	low-intermediate (1•0 - 1•3 0r 2•1)	1. Chinese individuals appreciate effort to learn Mandarin (binding of relationship)	1. Chinese prefer better English than low level Chinese.
		2. Language learning spill-over to cultural understanding	2. Difficult to use Chinese in a work-related situation
		3. Some understanding of Chinese language conversations	
Group C	high-intermediate (2•3 - 3•4)	1. Ability to carry on some conversations without a loss of meaning.	1. Unfamilarity with cultural context limits complete understanding (sometimes)
		2. Ability to interject Chinese words/expressions/ sayings to expand meaning in an English language conversation or presentation.	2. Second language vocabulary not complete enough to fully communicate
		3. Evidence of strong and lasting commitment to relationships with Chinese community.	
Group D	(native/ 4•..)	1. Ability to communicate in a "normal" conversational manner	1. Subtle communication still may be missed or misunderstood
		2. understanding of both the Chinese and foreign culture	2. Higher expectations as these individuals still are outside the culture